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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses how a writing center can act as a place to strengthen student voices, voices that exhibit an awareness of the conventions of academic discourse and voices that show ownership of their papers as well as the social aspect of listening to the voices of others. This is a significant question because it seems students feel as if they are speaking a foreign language when writing in the university. One way to approach the task is to redefine the role of the student tutor, to give it meaning beyond the formulaic concerns about thesis and clarity. Writing centers should be seen as a place where tutor and tutee exchange ideas, where they engage each other in pressing issues. (TB)

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A Case Study: Personal and Social Ethics in the Writing Center

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Thus far, we've looked at the theoretical implications of ethos, how the writing classroom can create this ethical stance, and how the writing class can provide ways for students to negotiate identity in relation to the separate bodies of knowledge in the university curriculum. Now we want to transcend the boundaries between ethos in the writing class to this idea of personal and social ethics in the Writing Center and ask the question: how can the Writing Center act as a place to strengthen students' voices--voices that exhibit an awarness of the conventions of academic discourse and voices that show ownership of the papers as well as the social aspect of listening to the voices of others?

This is a significant question because it seems students feel as if they are speaking a foreign language when writing in the university. Because they don't completely understand what is involved in becoming a member of the discourse, students assume marginal roles --people peering in, looking in, but not feeling as part of the community. Both Bizzell and Bartholomae address this issue in the articles "The Ethos of Academic Discourse" and "Inventing the University" respectively. Students re-invent the university each time they write instead of seeing themselves as active members. So how do we accomplish this? How do we create an atmosphere where students see their relationship to the university as having a personal as well as a social dimension? How do we make them feel comfortable in using the conventions of academic

discourse and opening themselves to modifying their positions? How can we achieve this in the Writng Center?

Our conceptions of the Writing Center involve the notion of peer tutoring that allows students, tutees, the opportunity to consult with someone about problems with their papers at any stage in the writing process. Brufee sees the Writing Center as a place where peer tutoring allows a social context or community where students of equal status can pool their resources together and discover what they need to know through the art of conversation. However, consultants as well as consultees feel as if their roles are scripted. Tutors often see themselves in a certain fixed role: "I have to ask certain questions and s/he has to answer." In fact, most consultations begin with "So what did you need help with." And most students/tutees see themselves as receivers of information, but seldom do they view themselves as "givers" in the consultation. In this way, both text and participants remain static. In the eyes of the consultant, the paper or assignment becomes something so fixed and set that the generic questions of "do you think you might need evidence," or "what is your thesis," or "this doesn't seem clear" seem to take over. The paper becomes one of many reviewed that particular day, and the consultant appears not to have changed and the consultee is merely *a* writer with *a* paper. If we think of the writing center as an extension of the classroom, the microcosmic writing class, how can we transcend the boundaries between writing class to the Writing Center to involve this idea of personal and social responsibility?

I ask this question because a year ago this idea of personal and social responsibility arose from a particular case study. A student appeared in the writing center to discuss his essay on welfare fraud. His paper offered an argument based on sweeping generalizations, unsupported by factual evidence or convincing reasoning. More specifically, he identified the cause of welfare fraud as coming from all African-Americans and Hispanics. His source for this accusation was his

first-hand experience, he claimed; his father owned a store where most of his employees were African-Americans and Hispanics. Because these particular individuals cheated the welfare system as well as his father, this student assumed every African-American and every Hispanic was a part of this "scam". His solution to such fraud involved deporting everyone who was not "American" to their native country. "Of course," he explained, "other people may not think this way, but this is my opinion." Not only did this student think his claim was proof enough for his "reform plan," but in a sense he refused to take the responsibility of hearing other arguments. To this student, argumentation involved giving a one-sided opinion, evidence for such a topic only required his personal experience, and counterarguments needed no particular treatement in his paper. Trying to be an expert in the discourse with a strong voice, this young man neglected his social responsibility to write with other voices in mind, such as mine. Instead, his ideas seemed to exist in a vacuum and not in a community of thinkers where minds meet, often clashing for the ultimate purpose of achieving, creating some kind of knowledge.

I suspected his "reform plan" would be offensive and disturbing to his professor and fellow students; it certainly was to me. Instead of exhibiting my initial reaction of anger, I asked the student about his reasoning behind such a claim, and he began to explain his "first hand experience." We talked about the implications of his accusation and how it accused people that were not even involved with the welfare system. We also discussed his definition of "American" and his assumptions about not only the reasons for welfare, but his assumptions about certain ethnic and racial groups. I noticed the student's name and asked if he and his family were originally from this country. He responded that his parents were native Palestinians and immigrated here right before his birth. "Should they, in essence, be asked to leave?" I asked. "Technically, they aren't *American.* Does your generalization also apply to your parents?" He

emphatically noted the difference in this situation rested in his father's financial ability to live here. "They can afford to live here. My father makes a lot of money."

My role as writing center consultant changed from the static, simply ask the basic questions to arrive at the problem, to someone involved in a conversation about racial stereotypes and welfare participants' rights. His role as a client of our center changed from mere sponge (i.e. tell me what's wrong with my grammar and punctuation) to defending and responding to my comments about his paper. In some way both of our "original" positions were changed because of listening to each other's thoughts. Both of our supposedly "set ideas and beliefs" clashed but ultimately we used these conflicting ideas to modify our voices. It became the personal and social responsibility of the both of us to incorporate each other's ideas into our voices. The consulatation provided the intimate atmosphere for this student to ask me questions about the presentation of an argument, to be completely honest with me--a situation that the actual writing class may have prevented. Within the forty-five minute consultation the conventions of academic discourse became a part of his discourse and my voice would eventually shape, modify his.

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